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ABSTRACT

The casual conversation of six pairs of Japanese and six pairs of American colleges students was analyzed for evidence of two related aspects of conversation management: the linguistic characteristics of utterance units and back-channel strategies. Utterance units are defined as those occurring between identifiable pauses or breaks in tempo. Back-channel expressions are brief comments received by the person who has the turn without relinquishing the turn (e.g., "uh huh"). The continuous flow of back-channel behavior by Japanese listeners and the speaker's ready acceptance of feedback, which is extraordinarily frequent in comparison to American English, suggest that Japanese interactants have a strong indication for mutual monitoring and cooperation. This supports evidence found in non-contrastive studies. Teachers are encouraged to incorporate culture-specific conversation management techniques into classroom language instruction. These would include strategies for starting and ending conversations, turn-taking, sending back-channel expressions, introducing a new topic and developing it interactionally, and understanding the interactional style as it is socioculturally defined in the target language community. (MSE)

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Variability in Conversation Management: Fragmentation of Discourse and Back-channel Expressions in Japanese and English*

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Recent studies in conversational interaction across speech communities have revealed that not only grammar proper, but also interactive strategies in face-to-face encounters differ from language to language. Although in the past, conversation analysts have noted differences in aspects of conversation management, often such studies have been plagued by their ad-hoc nature of data, anecdotal accounts or a casually defined contrastive context in which the analysis is made. In this study we focus upon two related aspects of conversation management, i.e., linguistic characteristics of utterance units and back-channel strategies, in a specific contrastive context of casual conversation in Japan and the United States.

The methodology adopted here is what we call "contrastive conversation analysis" as opposed to Hartman's (1980) "contrastive textology" in which primarily written text--what he calls "parallel text"--is analyzed. Although so-called contrastive analysis has been under attack over the last two decades--primarily because of its failure to meet unrealizable expectation i. e., prediction of learners' errors in its own right, widely held among applied linguists especially in the United States--the term contrastive analysis used

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here is broader in its application and does not necessarily predict actual learners' errors.

The data used for this study consists of twelve videotaped dyadic conversations, six American and six Japanese pairs, three male and three female in each country. The pairs selected in both countries were of the same sex and were all college students. In both countries the paired subjects identified each other as friends and they had had so-called casual conversation on numerous occasions. The filming was conducted in Tokyo and in New Jersey in May and February of 1985. In both locations an unattended video camera was used and the subjects were left alone in a room after they were instructed to talk as naturally as possible about anything they liked. To minimize the influence of being videotaped from being reflected in our data, we categorically excluded the initial two minutes of film and chose the three-minute segments following the first two minutes as data relevant to this study.

First, let us discuss the issue of the fragmentation of discourse. In conversational Japanese, a syntactic clause is frequently broken down into a number of smaller units bounded by pauses and mostly marked by distinct intonation contour. We identify this minimal unit of discourse as Pause-bounded Phrasal Units (henceforth PPU's). Although Chafe's (1980, 1985) concept of "idea units" which is based on Crystal's (1975) "tone-unit" is relevant here, for the reason of obtaining a criterion useful in both Japanese and English, we define our utterance unit of conversation purely on the basis of the presence of identifiable pause or break in on-going

tempo. As shown in Table 1, conversation-in-progress is fragmented into 626 units and 607 units in Japanese and English respectively.

Japanese pairs	Number of PPU's	PPU/GCP	Accompanied by Particles PPU	PPU/GCP	American pairs	Number of PPU's	PPU/GCP	Accompanied by SCS PPU	PPU/GCP
1	111	52	32	20	1	99	82	3	3
2	96	54	28	21	2	123	68	2	2
3	102	64	21	15	3	99	96	5	4
4	102	58	34	28	4	121	84	3	1
5	99	54	28	18	5	71	55	1	1
6	116	91	33	22	6	94	70	4	4
Total	626	353	176	124		607	455	18	15

Table 1. Forms of PPU's in Japanese and English

PPU=Pause-bounded Phrasal Unit, PPU/GCP=PPU boundary coinciding with Grammatical Completion Point, SCS=Sympathetic Circularity Sequence

Although the extent of fragmentation in the language of conversation is similar, which is likely to be partly controlled by human productive and perceptive capacities, linguistic characteristics of these units differ. One primary difference lies in the fact that in Japanese, final particles (*shuujoshi* and *kantoojoshi*) are attached in 28.12% of all cases of PPU's. Out of a total 626 PPU's 353 PPU's coincide with grammatical completion points and 35.13% of these PPU's are marked by final particles. As will be discussed later, the context that these particles provide in conversational interaction is significant. In English, we concentrated on what Bernstein (1962) calls "sympathetic circularity sequences" like "you know" which occurred only 18 times at the PPU boundary, that is only 2.97% of all PPU's. Later we will discuss the significance of differences in the PPU forms as observed here in relation to back-channel behaviors.

Now, let us turn to the second issue, back-channel expressions. The term back channel is characterized by Yngve (1970) as *uh huh*'s and brief comments received by the person who has the turn without relinquishing the turn. To concentrate on back-channel clearly identified on the basis of the turn-taking context, in this study we focus on occurrences where an interlocutor who assumes primarily a listener's role sends brief messages during the other interlocutor's speaking turn. We refer to these back-channel occurrences as "turn-internal listener back channel."

Beyond verbalized *uh-huh*'s and brief comments, various aspects of nonverbal behavior may be called back-channel expressions--such as direction and duration of gaze, self-adaptors, gesticulation and vertical and horizontal head movement. Because our data source fails to provide detailed eyegaze monitoring and extended occurrences of self-adaptors, and because head movement is observed frequently at the time when back channels occur and it is speculated to play a crucial role, only clearly visible head movement is noted in this study. In observing head movement we have limited our focus on vertical head movement--usually called "head nod"--and horizontal head movement, the so-called "head shake." Another utterable frequently observed in our data is laughter. As suggested by Schenkein (1972), laughter plays an important role in communication and in this study we identify the listener's laughter during the other interlocutor's turn to be a case of back channel.

Having identified what specific phenomena we will be investigating in the present study, we now turn to a discussion of data. First let us observe data set (1), a 47-second segment of casual conversation taken from our Japanese data.[1]

(1)

1. A: Dakedo/
   but
   'But'

2. are atsuryoku ga tsuyoi n da yo ne hora/
   that pressure S strong NOM BE FP FP you-see
   'there's great pressure,'

3. hoogakubu jan./
   law-school TAG
   ' 'cause (I'm graduating from) law school.'

                    H H H
   (B:1 Aa soo ka hoo ka uun)
   oh so Q so Q uh huh
   'Oh, I see, I see.'

4. dakara/
   so
   'so,'

                                H
5. mottainai to ka iwarete sa./
   wastful QT Q say-PASS-and FP
   'I'm told that it's not good enough for me.'

   H H
6. B: A mawari kara ne./
   oh surrounding from FP
   'You mean (you hear that) from people around you.'

   (A:1 H)

7. Oya kara sureba kodomo ga sureba iya/ LAUGH H
   parent from do-if child S do-if no
   'From your parents' view, if the child does.'

   H H H
   (A:2 Soo soo soo soo)
   yeah yeah yeah yeah
   'Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.'

8. A: Demo oya oya wa ne moo saikin soo mo/
but parent parent T FP any more recently so even
'But nowadays parents don't'

(B:2 Soo)
so
'I see.'

9. iwanaku-natta kedo /H
say-NEG-become but
'say those things.'

(B:3 H H)

10. tomodachi toka wa sa mottainai yoo toka sa/
friend or T FP wastful FP or FP
'The way my friends look at it, they say things like, "It's not good enough for you."'

H
(B:4 Uun)
uh huh
'Uh huh.'

11. Issho-ni sa hora/
together FP see
'You see, we're all together'

12. nihongo kyooshi no yoosei no kurasu no sa/
Japanese teacher LK training LK class LK FP
'in the same Japanese language teacher training class.'

(B:5 Un)
yeah
'Yeah.'

13. tomodachi ttara nan da kedo issho-ni ukete-ru hito ga
friend say-if what BE but together are taking people S
iru no./
there are FP
'and although we aren't exactly friends, there are people who are taking the class together.'

(B:6 Un un)
uh huh
'Uh huh.'

14. kyuu juu-nin no kurasu da kara/
nine ten people LK class BE because
'There are nine or ten students in the class and'

H H
(B:7 Un un)
uh huh
'Uh huh.'

H
15. moo shitashiku-natte/
already become friendly-and
'we've become friendly with each other.'

(B:8 H)

16. daitai toshiue no sa/
mostly older LK FP
'Most of them are older.'

H H
(B:9 Uun un)
uh huh
'Uh huh.'

H
17. Onna no hito ga ooi wake./
female LK person S many NOM
'women, many of them are.'

H
(B:10 Un)
uh huh
'Uh huh.'

18. moo ooeru yamete naru toka ne./
already office worker quit-and become or FP
'They wish to become teachers after leaving clerical positions at companies.'

(B:11 Un)
hum
'Hum.'

19. soo-yuu hito ga sa/
such person S FP
'And those people'

(B:12 Un)
hum
'Hum.'

20. mottainai yo to ka yuu n da yo./
wastful FP QT Q say NOM BE FP
'say to me, "The job isn't good enough for you.'

H
21. B: Aa, sono D no hoogakubu made itte./
oh that D LK law-school even go-and
'Oh, I see, they say (something like) you're graduating from D University's Law School.'

(A:3 Soo soo)
yeah yeah
'Yeah, yeah.'

22. A: watashi nanka C datta no yo./
I like C BE FP FP
'"I graduated from C University you know," they say.'

23. B: Da dakara D D demo ne/
so so D D even FP
'So although we are talking about D University,'

H
24. yappari naka de iru yori/
after all inside at be more than
'more than the way those of us on the inside can see it,'

(A:4 Un)
uh huh
'Uh huh.'

25. maa ima no hyoogen de ichioo soo na n da kedo/
well now LK expression in more or less so BE NOM BE but
'as you know what I mean by the expression I just used,'

(A:5 Un)
yeah
'Yeah.'

H
26. soto kara mitemo/
outside from see-even-when
'when seen from the outside,

(A:6 H)

27. D no hoogakubu dattara doo-ni demo naru maa gen'eki
D LK law school be-if whatever even become well first-rate
H
tte yuu ka./
QT say Q
'the Law School at D University is still good and is first rate, I should say.'

H H H
(A:7 Soo soo soo)
yeah yeah yeah
'Yeah, yeah, yeah.'

We observe in data set (1) 12 cases of B's back channel during A's turn, and 7 cases of A's back channel during B's turn.[2] Some back-channel devices are strictly verbal as in the case of B's back channel (2), *soo*; some are strictly nonverbal as in A's back channel 1. Some listener back-channel behavior combined verbal with nonverbal signs as in B's back channel (1), *Aa soo ka hoo ka uun* accompanied by three repetitious head movements. Our cursory observation reveals that back-channel strategies in Japanese involve various brief phrases with or without head movement. We also find that during the 47-second interval turn-internal listener back channel occurred 19 times, at least once in every 2.47 seconds.

Now let us examine comparable data, a 47-second segment taken from our American subjects, data set (2).

(2)

1. A: I ordered some escargot/
2. and got me a coke./
3. I was like/
4. B: I have never been to K. Miller./
5. A: I don't know just like/
6. strikes me as being very psudointellectual./
7. Don and I were walking past (?) going to that little shop/
8. past it's open only three days or something./
(B:1 Um hum)
9. You know the one I bought my uh/
10. dice bag./
11. B: Yeah I think I know what you mean./
(A:1 Yeah.)
12. A: And we were going there and this guy came out of K. Miller because he notices us looking at the menu and he goes/
13. "Hey, Babe, want a drink? Come on inside I'll pay for you."/
(B:2 LAUGH)
14. And we were like "Oh go away."/
15. B: Weird./
(A:2 Yeah)
16. No, I heard the food's actually good though./
17. A: All I know is Polly offered me a slimy little escargot and I said thank you but no. LAUGH/
18. B: Oh, I like escargot.'
19. A: I don't./

20. I I just keep on thinking slime/
21. sledge/
22 sea bottoms you know./

We observe only four cases of back channel in our data set (2), two by speaker B and two by speaker A. We see three utterances and one case of LAUGH, one of which is accompanied by head movement. Our Japanese and English data suggest, although very preliminary at this point, that although back-channel phenomena exist in both languages, they utilize different devices and operate in a different manner and frequency.

After examining 36 minutes--three minutes each from 12 pairs--of conversational data, we observed a significant difference in frequencies of back channels as shown in Table 2.

Japanese pairs:		American pairs:	
1	45	1	22
2	37	2	8
3	35	3	13
4	42	4	15
5	39	5	6
6	29	6	9
Total	227 (mean=37.83)	Total	73 (mean=12.17)

Table 2. Frequency of Turn-internal Listener Back Channels among Japanese and American Pairs

The overall frequency count for the turn-internal listener back-channel was 227 among Japanese speakers. In English data we find listener back-channel behavior significantly less frequent, totalling only 73 times. In every Japanese pair we observe a higher frequency of back channel than in any of the American pairs.

The most frequently occurring type of back-channel strategy, brief utterables, totaled approximately 57.89% for Japanese and 47.95% for English. Head movement accompanied these brief utterables 63.03% of the

time in Japanese but merely 14.29% among American subjects. In the second most frequent category, vertical head movement (which does not accompany verbal signs), Japanese pairs produced it 76 times while American subjects produced it only 15 times.

In English data we observe that brief phrases and ellipted sentences such as *I don't remember* occur 10 times (or 13.7%) whereas in Japanese such phrases occur 13 times and constitutes only 4.56%. The laugh category was observed 30 times and 13 times among Japanese and American pairs respectively. Horizontal head movement occurred once in Japanese data, while the figure in American data was 4.

Having discussed the frequency of back channel, let us now focus on function. Why do listeners feel a need to send back-channel signals in the first place? According to Schegloff (1982), back channel is characterized as a "continuer" a sign through which the listener encourages the speaker to continue to talk. Schegloff reaches this interpretation on the basis of the fact that the listener passes up opportunities for other-initiated repair during moments in which the listener could potentially take turns.

This characterization by Schegloff is based on the basis of the notion of sequencing in conversational interaction. The notion of sequencing and the procedure for investigating conversational phenomena in sequence, although useful as analytic devices, sometimes suffer from over-simplification which may obscure important features of interactional complexity of situated talk. Note that this characterization of sequencing fails to capture back-channel behavior that co-occurs with the speaker's verbalization when there is no pause. Similarly, back-channel behavior may sometimes occur concurrently with

the last syllable of the speaker's utterance. These cases of back-channel activities are used while the speaker continues to talk without clearly hinting that the speaker is going to pause.

This implies that back channel in Japanese, at least in the data examined, is used in an environment where other-initiated repair is not expected. Thus we can not characterize back channel simply as a "continuer." Passing up an opportunity for repair becomes irrelevant since such opportunity never existed in the first place. In other words, although back-channel behavior may function in part as a "continuer" and may be characterized as an expression of passing up an opportunity to initiate repair as suggested by Schegloff, this characterization does not account for all cases.

One solution to this problem is incorporating various functions on the basis of different aspects of communication. We propose that functions of the back-channel behavior in Japanese and English may be specified in terms of the following six categories although they are not meant to be exhaustive nor mutually exclusive.

1) continuer
2) display of understanding of content
3) support and empathy toward the speaker
4) agreement
5) strong emotional response
6) minor addage, change and request of relevant information

Let us now focus our attention on another issue relating to both fragmentation of talk and to back-channel expression, the context in which back channel behavior occurs. In Japanese, first, we observe that in the majority of cases turn-internal listener back-channel behavior occurs near or at the PPU boundary.

Secondly we find that these PPU's are marked by linguistic devices frequently selected by the speaker. One significant device is the sentence/phrase final particles mentioned earlier. In data set (1), the particle *ne* occurs three times while *sa* occurs five times and *yo* twice, *no* and *ka* each occurs once at the point of clausal unit. Final particles in Japanese (or what Martin 1975 calls "sentence extension") are normally used to impact some additional hint of the speaker's attitude toward what s/he is saying. *Ne*, which is often translated into English tag questions and what Uyeno (1971) calls a "particle of rapport," solicits listener response--either in the form of the back channel (if the speaker continues the turn) or in the form of a change of turn.

Particle endings in general then seem to signal, together with the pause itself, the moment where some sort of feed back may be relevantly performed in the sequence of the conversation-in-progress. Particle endings marked 50.22% of all back-channel occurrences. In 45.63% (94/206) of PPU locations marked by particles, back channels were displayed.

Thirdly, we find that even when no particles are attached, pauses occur near or at the major clause junctures--such as at the juncture of coordinate and subordinate clauses. Note first that subordinate clauses which are marked by conjunctions such as *ba* as in (1.7) in data set (1)

also function to mark the ending of an utterance. In such cases the matrix clause may not appear at all. As suggested by Ooishi (1970), although these subordinate conjunctions serve conjunctive functions, they appear in casual conversation in ellipted sentences, where the main clause is not expected. Such ending leaves some space for the listener to fill in his/her own interpretation of the main clause and thereby provides interactional options for both participants. Among 6 pairs of the subjects examined, out of 227 locations where back channels occurred, 70.93% occurred at major grammatical junctures, some accompanied by sentence final particles and/or head movements.

Another point of interest, gerundive verb endings were found to mark PPU boundaries. For example, *natte* in (1.15) and *itte* in (1.21) in data set (1) mark utterance boundaries. The gerundive form is used as the conjunction 'and' and gives the impression that the talk is not completely over and therefore provides the listener an opportunity to respond with a "continuer."

Data set (1) also reveals an interesting nonverbal behavior on the part of the speaker at the point where listener back channel is observed, namely, the head movement that cooccurs at or near the final syllable of the speaker's utterance. There are seven such cases where back-channel devices follow speaker's head movement in data set (1)--(in A's back channels (2), (3), (4), (6) and (7), and B's back channels (3), (8) and (10)). These head movements were observed quite frequently across all data we examined. Out of a total 227 back channels, 28.19% occurred in the context of the speaker's head movement.

In summary, regarding the context for back channel, reccurring patterns emerge; 1) usually the listener back channel occurs near or during the pause between clausal units of utterance within the speaker's turn and near or at PPU's, 2) clausal units are marked not only by standard sentence ending forms such as verbs but also by gerundive forms of the verbs and conjunctive particles, 3) the back channel often appears at clausal and PPU boundaries marked by final particles such as *ne*, *sa* and *yo*, and finally, 4) the utterance final syllable which precedes listener back channel may be accompanied by head movement.

In terms of the types of context and their association to the back-channel strategy in American English, we focused on the devices similar to what we examined in Japanese, namely, grammatical completion, sympathetic circularity sequences such as *you know* plus tag questions, and head movement. Among 12 American subjects we observe 97.26% of back channel at the point of grammatical completion. Sympathetic circularity sequences which occurred 18 times at PPU boundaries mark the context for back channel in only 6 cases of the 73 back channels (8.21%), while head movement occurs only in 5.48% of the total locations of back channel. In English, then, the grammatical completion point is the single most powerful discourse context for back channel; other criteria appear to mark only marginally the points of relevance for back channel.

We can conclude then, although grammatical competion is a relevant discourse context in both Japanese and English, in Japanese, sentence particles and head movements also mark to a reasonably significant degree the context for back channel. Note, however, that this study does not address the predictability of back channel occurrences given the discourse contexts identified above as providing "cues." We have

only observed actual occurrences of back-channel expressions and the characteristics of their discourse contexts.

Before we proceed, one point of caution should be noted. We have only examined devices similar to what are observed in Japanese context for contrastive purposes. Naturally both in Japanese and English, there are other potential signs that are candidates for relevant context. Therefore we must be warned that our conclusions are based on these limited select devices under discussion here. However, in general it is reasonable to conclude (in regard to three devices examined in this study) that English does not provide, above and beyond grammatical completion, overt devices such as the types available in Japanese to encourage listener back-channel responses as overtly or as frequently as in Japanese.

What we observed in this study implies that "linguistic relativity" exists not only in lexicon and syntax but also in the ways people manage conversation interactionally. Although it is unwise to assume, without reasonable supporting evidence, that there exists correlations or general correspondences between linguistic norms and its contextual cultural norms, we can make the following interpretations.

The continuous flow of back channels sent by Japanese listeners, and the speaker's ready acceptance of such extraordinarily frequent feed back in comparison to American English, suggest that Japanese interactants possess a strong indication for mutual monitoring and cooperation. Whereas points similar to this have been made by Clancy (1982) and Mizutani (1983), among others, such characterization has been made frequently in an imagined or casually defined contrastive context. The result of this study designed in the contrastive conversation

analysis of Japanese and American English provides some evidence to support this long-claimed preoccupation of the Japanese people, i.e., highly monitered, cooperative style of social interaction.

The variability in conversation management as observed in this study offers suggestions toward pedagogical applications. For example, language learners may be encouraged to focus on interactive aspects of conversation--rather than to merely pay close attention to the language of conversation as we usually do. Instructional videos and/or self-produced videos of conversational interaction may be used in order to provide language learners an opportunity to study so-called "conversation management." Students may be directed to make note of: (1) how to start and end conversations, (2) how strategies for turn-taking are realized, (3) how to send back-channel expressions, (4) how to introduce a new topic and how to develop it interactionally, and above all (5) they may be encouraged to understand the interactional style that is socioculturally defined in the target speech community.

As a final note we should mention some drawbacks to this study. First we artificially excluded the participant's behavior during the inter-turn pause, which eventually has to be incorporated before we reach any final conclusions. Secondly, our data is limited not only in numbers but also in terms of genre. Whether or not what we discovered in this study of casual conversational discourse is applicable to other genres awaits further investigation.

And thirdly, when we undertake a contrastive analysis as designed in this study we must face the critical issue of "equivalence." In order to conduct a contrastive discourse analysis within the context of contrastive analysis such as proposed by Whitman (1970), one must first

obtain "equivalent" forms in languages to be contrasted. What constitutes "equivalence" in each society contrasted is controversial and remains unresolved. Our attempt to obtain equivalence in this study is made in terms of the type of genre and the devices investigated. Thus we must remain cautious as we evaluate the results of this study which is based on a narrow and limited perspective.

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Footnotes

1. In data presentation, following abbreviations are used: BE=copulative verb *be*, FP=final particle, H=vertical head movement, LK=linker (linking nominals), NOM=nominalizer, PASS=passive morpheme, Q=question marker, QT=quotative marker, S=subject, T=theme, TAG=tag-question-like auxiliary verbs, /=pause, (?)=audible but unidentifiable utterances.

2. The reader may argue that A's back channel (2) does not occur during B's turn and should therefore not be included in our analysis. We included, however, back channels that occur immediately after the current speaker stops talking and are followed by a substantial pause before the next turn starts. This decision was made because such back-channel response gives the impression that it is the listener's response to the current speaker during his/her turn and it occurs before a substantial turn transitional period starts.

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